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Lao refugees add to charges of chemical warfare

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Ban Vinai refugee camp, Thailand

They have many tales to tell, these refugees from Laos. Some 20,000 of them crowd this neat, well-cared-for camp, just a few miles from the Mekong River, which separates Laos from Thailand.

But the stories that have gathered most attention are allegations of gas and chemical warfare in Laos. For most of the refugees here are Hmong hill tribesmen. And many are remnants of the army of Vang Pao, a CIA-financed group that for years fought the communists in Laos. Now they fight a losing battle with the Laos government.

Not all of the Hmong were anticommunist. Some were neutral, and some actually supported Vietnamese-backed communist Pathet Lao forces.

But today the anticommunist Hmong are on the run. Along the Mekong a visiting correspondent sees makeshift encampments of these strikingly attired black-garbed, silver-belted tribesmen, some of whom sport US canteens. They cross the Mekong in the dry season when the water is low, when crops are few, and when communist military offensives pick up steam. This year they have begun their crossings earlier and may reach record numbers.

"The planes are American-made Cessnas. They carry eight rockets each, and the chemicals they drop leave red, blue, and white smoke. Some drop small bombs with clusters of nails."

That testimony by refugee Vatoua Xiong is typical of the accounts heard here. The chemicals alleged to have been dropped by Lao-Vietnamese forces are said to cause bleeding, headaches, and death. The only available effective medicine, say the refugees, is opium.

It all begins with government calls for the highland slash-and-burn farmers to relocate in the lowlands, say refugees; planes drop leaflets, and calls to surrender are circulated. If a village refuses, the planes come in, scattering their sometimes-lethal doses of colored powders and gas, according to some refugees.

Anticommunist refugees say they do not want to relocate because they would be forced to give up their roving form of farming, to live in concentrated (rather than spread-out villages), and to undergo indoctrination. They fear that those of them who worked for the Americans will be sent to prison camps near Vietnam.

The refugee charges resulted last December in a resolution in the US House of Representatives sharply condemning the government of Laos. Its conclusion: "The Hmong hills tribes of Laos have been the victims of the concerted use of lethal chemical agents during the period covering 1976 to at least May of this year."

Some experts who have studied the question believe the House resolution goes further than the evidence presented to hearings by State and Defense Department officials warrants.

"We do not have absolute proof of these charges; however the result of US government investigations supports the conclusion that some chemical agent or agents were being used in Laos during the period in question, . . ." is the way the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Southeast Asian Affairs put it. "It has been very difficult to obtain physical evidence of poison gas. Some of the symptoms described could possibly result from materials other than lethal poison gas, e.g. defoliants, riot control agents, phosphorus shells, etc."

In Laos itself some Western diplomats express concern the gas charges could become blown out of proportion and become an overly emotional issue.

"Any use of chemical warfare must be opposed, but we must be extremely careful that the charges are well grounded," said one.

One problem is that most charges of gas use come from Vang Pao supporters. This could mean that the chemicals were used only against pro-American Vang Pao holdouts. Or it could mean Vang Pao supporters, trained in psychological warfare by the CIA, have mounted a coordinated propaganda campaign against the Lao government, one diplomat in Vientiane notes.

For its part Lao government spokesmen firmly deny that poison gas has been used. "Why should we do it? The Meo [Hmong] are our own people," Information Minister Sisana Sisane told the Monitor. "We have so many soldiers in these areas that we don't need to use gas," said another official.

But Lao officials continue to use the derogatory term "Meo" which means "savage" rather than the "Hmong" (free roaming) preferred by the tribesmen themselves, even though the pre-communist Lao government in the 1960s officially (if not in practice) changed the term from Meo to Hmong.

The Lao government justifies its policy of relocating the Hmong on grounds that roaming slash-and-burn agriculture erodes mountaintops. It says it is retraining the tribesmen in more modern farming methods.

Critics say the relocation moves the tribesmen into lowland areas where they are more vulnerable to malaria, and destroys their traditional pattern of life.

But one major problem is lack of solid information. Gas allegations are based on spotty refugee interviews. (A US State Department report was based on only 20.) No one has produced physical evidence of gas or chemical warfare. And doctors in refugee camps have been reluctant to claim symptoms are specifically from gas.

Information Minister Sisana Sisane told the Monitor some 3,000 families have been moved. If accurate this would be a small part of the total population of 300,000 to 400,000 Hmong.

The US State Department maintains that because of the resettlement policy, about one-fifth of the total Hmong population has fled to Thailand.